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SUBJECT: LEBANON: YOUTH BECOME POLITICALLY ACTIVE THROUGH
MEPI SHADOW GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

SUMMARY

1. (U) Lebanon's Youth Shadow Government (YSG) is a Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) funded program designed to place college level individuals in the different GOL ministries to serve as shadow ministers. EmbOffs held a reception to welcome the participants in December 2007 and have been following the group's progress. The shadow ministers are excited about participating in this program. However, a number of the participants have expressed their pessimism about the ability of politically active youth to change the current political situation in Lebanon. The majority of the shadow ministers felt that they could not be taken seriously in the field of politics without being a member of one of the main political parties. The new ministers added that many Lebanese youth were leaving Lebanon due to the inability to get jobs without relying on political connections. They all pointed out that this was the primary appeal of the YSG; it provides them with a way to be politically active, but independent of the powerful and archaic political machines in Lebanon. End Summary.

YOUTH SHADOW GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

2. (U) The MEPI funded Youth Shadow Government (YSG), provides Lebanese public and private university students with an opportunity to experience the Lebanese democratic political process in action. YSG encourages political involvement while promoting paradigms of good governance, anti-corruption and public transparency. The shadow government monitors political developments occurring on the national level and acts as an unofficial watchdog over the government's performance. This entails monitoring each ministry, explaining to their university colleagues and the public at large to the government's performance, and debating alternate options for the decisions that were made by the government.

3. (U) MEPI's local partner for this program is the Nahar Ash Shabab Foundation, which was founded after the December 2005 assassination of MP Gebran Tueni, Member of Parliament and editor/publisher of the An-Nahar newspaper. His daughter Nayla and other members of the Tueni family formed this foundation to honor Tueni's belief in the potential of the younger generations to bring about change. A leader of the Cedar Revolution, he began plans for the Shadow Government program, which came to fruition after his death.

14. (U) During a reception organized by MEPI Emboffs, the 2007-2008 shadow ministers expressed their excitement at being involved in the YSG. However, many of the shadow ministers told MEPI Emboffs that they were dismayed at the inability of politically active youth to escape from Lebanon's traditional party politics - a model which they do not believe reflects the interests of the majority of their peers. The YSG programs contains a number of elements designed to empower these young leaders. Since the beginning of the current session in November 2007, YSG members have attended training sessions discussing teamwork, political institutions, leadership and negotiation skills, report writing, public budgeting, and persuasive communication.

15. (U) Though the current political deadlock in Lebanon has affected the YSG's range of "shadow activities" with the ministers, the YSG continues to meet as a group weekly to discuss the Siniora cabinet's upcoming agenda items and to comment or debate the issues. YSG cabinet "decisions" are published in the An-Nahar newspaper's weekly supplement devoted to youth issues. A few YSG members have shared with us their duties in the ministries. At the Ministry of Education, the YSG participant is working with a network of NGO's to help organize awareness sessions on drugs, violence and discrimination in a variety of Lebanese public schools. At the Minister of Economy, the YSG participant is working to reactivate and expand the Consumer Protection Department which is severely understaffed. In support of this initiative, the Ministry has agreed to form a work-study program for university students to focus on this issue.

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16. (U) The YSG is also becoming more well-known in Lebanon. They have held several media events in the last few months, including a two-hour appearance in February on NTV's show "Al-Fassad." An-Nahar continues to devote space to the program's achievements in their weekly youth supplement.

FRANK TALK WITH THE YSG MEMBERS

17. (U) During their meeting with EmbOffs, this group spoke confidently on a wide range of topics. Ramzi Teeni, the shadow Agriculture Minister, said there is a lack of motivation and increased pessimism that persists amongst politically active youth in Lebanon these days. The youth cannot be independent. Sireen Abu Zein, the shadow Archeology Minister, said youth not aligned with big political parties in Lebanon do not want to become involved in politics because they do not have the ability to make an impact. Abdel Aziz Saad, the shadow Justice Minister, added that the political parties do not even allow the youth within there own parties, to have their voices heard and that there is an inability to criticize the existing leadership of political parties.

18. (U) Razi Hajj, the shadow Economy and Trade Minister, said that over half of the educated Lebanese youth live and work abroad, mainly in the Gulf, while others prefer to attend college in the U.S. and Europe. Saad added that the Christian/Lebanese youth living in the Gulf especially dislike the expat lifestyle there because the social night life cannot compare to Beirut. They are only there to find jobs and earn money. Hajj said this effect was the result of the political instability that exists in Lebanon and the inability to be independent politically and to find non-politically connected jobs. Hajj noted that most jobs available to young professionals are gained by what is commonly known as "wasta" or a connection of sorts with someone who has the ability to get the applicant the position he or she wants. According to Hajj, these connections are mostly political in nature. Zein, who lives in the Chouf

region, offered her own personal example. When she applied for a job and went for an interview, the person conducting the interview told Zein to obtain a letter written by her father that has the recommendation of the dominant political party in the Chouf region, Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt.

¶9. (U) The youth at this event said they hoped the YSG program would be a way to become politically active without having to align themselves with one of the main Lebanese political parties. Jessica Azar, the Youth and Sports Minister described the YSG group as being autonomous. Azar also said the majority of the YSG ministers want Lebanese youth to put Lebanon and being Lebanese first, before their sectarian community, which is not the case today. The youth shadow ministers want some type of shared common goals, according to Azar.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) This current group of shadow minister is genuinely excited and ready to get involved as much as possible in the day to day operations of their individual ministries. Many of them bounce ideas off one another to discuss "best practices" at their individual ministries. Through their roles as monitors and liaisons between the community and the GOL ministries, the YSG ministers want to make a positive change in Lebanon without getting involved in the partisan/sectarian politics that plagues Lebanon today.

¶11. (U) The local partner, Nahar Ash Shabab Foundation, has proved to be an effective and responsible partner. Nayla Tueni has expressed her personal commitment to this program and looks forward to expanding the concept to include a "Shadow Parliament" in the future. Post strongly supports continued and even increased funding for this MEPI initiative. End Comment.
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